

How does
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How does Shakespeare retain a degree of sympathy for Macbeth through to the end of the play? In order for this play to be a tragedy, we must feel some sympathy for the protagonist through to the end of the play — that is one of the features of the genre. So, how does Shakespeare retain a degree of sympathy for the “hell-hound” who murders Duncan (his King, kinsman and guest), orders the assassination of his best friend Banquo, and has Macduff’s entire family savagely put to the sword? While the gravity of Macbeth’s crimes cannot be overstated, he is a far more complex character than “this dead butcher”, as Malcolm describes him in his closing speech. Our initial impression of Macbeth is of a loyal, brave and much respected soldier: “brave Macbeth”, “Bellona’s bridegroom”, “noble Macbeth”. His positive attributes are stressed from the beginning of the play, while he fends off Scotland’s enemies, both internal and external. His basic kindness is also stressed. Lady Macbeth describes her husband as being “full of the milk of human kindness”, and fears that Macbeth may not be ruthless enough to kill the king. In assessing Macbeth’s culpability, we must keep in mind the influence exercised on him by the witches, who tempt him with the prospects of becoming king: “All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter.” While the witches have no direct control over Macbeth, they aim at his ambition and malevolently use it against him. They achieve their evil goal by drawing out the ambition that is within him from the beginning (his hamartia). Macbeth’s shocked reaction to the prophecy that he will be king suggests that he already harbours this ambition, that the witches have somehow read his deepest, darkest thought. Effectively, the witches simply toy around with Macbeth’s flaw — ambition. Macbeth is a reluctant murderer.

Upon thorough examination of his conscience, he realises that as Duncan's kinsman, subject and host, his duty is to protect Duncan, "not bear the knife myself". When he remembers the virtues of Duncan's kingship, he concludes that his only reason for murdering him is his own "vaulting ambition". At this point he firmly tells Lady Macbeth that, "We will proceed no further in this business", expressing his desires to enjoy the "golden opinions from all sorts of people". Lady Macbeth plays a critical role in the build-up to the murder. She uses her powers of persuasion to make Macbeth change his mind after he decides not to go ahead with the murder. She taunts him by questioning his courage: "Art thou afeard?" She also questions his masculinity, by equating murder to manliness and courage. Then she uses emotional blackmail, claiming that she would sooner smash the head of the child she was feeding than break her word to him. It is very significant that the audience does not see Macbeth murdering Duncan. The play focuses on the inner torment of the villain rather than the suffering of the victim. We see Macbeth's doubts beforehand: "He's here in double trust..." and his feelings of guilt: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand..." regret: "wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" and horror: "I am afraid to think what I have done. Look on it again I dare not" afterwards. Macbeth's troubled conscience suggests that, despite his evil deeds, he never entirely loses his humanity. The air-drawn dagger that leads him to Duncan's chamber, the voices he hears and the ghost of Banquo are all products of Macbeth's guilty conscience and vivid imagination. While he appears to be unaffected by the dreadful slaughter of Macduff's family, Macbeth is initially unwilling to fight Macduff in Act V

because he has too much of his family's blood on his conscience: " My soul is too much charged with blood of thine already". This continued evidence of Macbeth's troubled conscience evokes a certain degree of sympathy from the audience. We feel some sympathy for Macbeth in his painful awareness of the high price to be paid for achieving his ambition by evil means. No sooner has he killed Duncan that he realises that he will never sleep peacefully, having murdered " the innocent sleep" of a good king. He even admits to envying Duncan's peaceful sleep of death: " Duncan is in his grave; after life's fitful fever he sleeps well... nothing can touch him further". As the play draws to a close, Macbeth loses all interest in life: " I have lived long enough. My way of life has fallen into a sere". When Macbeth hears of his wife's suffering, he is not indifferent. He wishes that the doctor could cure her illness: " Can'st thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow". He also wishes that the doctor could miraculously restore Scotland to good health: " If thou could'st, Doctor, sound the sickness of my land, find her disease and purge it to a sound and pristine health". Here we can sense Macbeth's regret at the effects of his tyranny. While Macbeth's dramatic moral decline and his evil deeds are appalling, we still retain a degree of sympathy and understanding for him. We realise that while Macbeth does evil, he is not evil. While he is a ferocious warrior who carves a bloody path through the ranks of his enemies on the battlefield, he is too sensitive to play the roles of a murderer and butcher unaffected. Macbeth is essentially a noble individual whose finer qualities are corrupt by ambition. Ambition is the hamartia, the fatal flaw that brings about Macbeth's downfall. We are also aware of the influence exerted on Macbeth

by Lady Macbeth and the witches, and accept that their influences relieve his guilt to some degree. In the end, because Macbeth is a flawed hero and not a super hero, because he is capable of doing great right and great wrong, the audience can empathise with him. We can understand his motivations and actions, even though we may not like them, because they are the same motivations that drive us all. It is because we understand Macbeth, that we retain a degree of sympathy for him through to the end of the play.